

# POWER CRISIS:

**Despite Transparency Failures, Utility Information Reveals Major Home Shutoff Problem**

**More Than 1 Million Household Power Disconnects Reported Across 17 States**

**By Greer Ryan • Center for Biological Diversity • Updated June 2021**

## INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic and Texas energy crisis highlighted a crucial fact: Losing power can be lethal. This makes energy access a critical human right.

Yet families continue to lose power not only because of extreme weather and other climate-fueled disasters, but also because of the current profit-driven utility business model and barriers to effective regulation. When Americans cannot pay their essential utility bills, they risk being disconnected from life-sustaining services.

To gauge the scale of the shutoff problem during the COVID public health crisis, we reviewed data from utility regulatory commissions across the United States. Most states do not require private utilities to publicly disclose how many households they have disconnected.

**Data from just 17 states reveals that utilities have performed more than 1 million household shutoffs since the COVID pandemic was declared a national emergency in March 2020. In Georgia one utility reported disconnects equivalent to nearly 8% of its customers.**

## BACKGROUND

The problem of utility shutoffs for nonpayment is a longstanding crisis, predating COVID-19 but exacerbated by the pandemic. Utilities have been disproportionately burdening low-wealth communities and those of color with high energy costs and shutoffs for years.<sup>1</sup> But during a public health emergency, when Americans have been asked to stay home to protect their own health and that of others, losing power is particularly dangerous. Recent research has shown that if there had been a nationwide utility-shutoff moratorium in place since March 2020, *as many as 87,000 lives lost to COVID might have been saved.*<sup>2</sup>

Although the COVID crisis is far from over, as more Americans are being vaccinated, it is clear we need to think not only in terms of short-term solutions to stop shutoffs, but also long-term reform of our energy system to address the chronic shutoffs problem in this country. Recent estimates show that people across the country are facing utility debt in the tens of billions of dollars and that families of color have been particularly hard-hit.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See, e.g., NAACP, Lights Out in the Cold: Reforming Utility Shut-Off Policies as if Human Rights Matter (March 2017), <https://www.naacp.org/climate-justice-resources/lights-out-in-the-cold/>.

<sup>2</sup> Researchers found that if moratoria on disconnections had been in place across all U.S. counties from March 2020 to November 2020, COVID-related deaths could have been reduced by 14.8%. Applying this percentage to the more than 594,000 deaths as of May 2021, we estimate 87,912 deaths that might have been avoided had a federal moratorium been in place. See National Bureau of Economic Research, Housing Precarity & the COVID-19 Pandemic: Impacts of Utility Disconnection and Eviction Moratoria on Infections and Deaths Across US Counties (January 2021), <https://www.nber.org/papers/w28394>.

<sup>3</sup> National Energy Assistance Directors Association, Press Release: Electric and Gas Residential Arrearages are Growing Rapidly, <https://neada.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/covidarrearspr.pdf>.

The first step to solving these problems requires understanding their scale. Unfortunately, even getting a clear picture of how many households are cut off from power is difficult because public data is very limited. Some utilities are required by state utility commissions to provide this data and report it to the public, but the majority of commissions do not. And even among those that do, most commissions do not make the data accessible and understandable to the public.

## KEY FINDINGS

### What we know about disconnects for nonpayment:

- **Data from just 17 states shows more than 1 million disconnects since COVID was declared a national emergency one year ago.** The overwhelming majority of these disconnects were for nonpayment. Although disconnect reports are not exhaustive, those we found amount to more than 1,126,999 million household disconnects for data available through April 2021.<sup>4</sup> This figure does not include the 14% of Americans served by public power.
- **Some major private utilities disconnecting power include:**
  - Duke Energy, which reported nearly 180,000 disconnects across three states (Florida, North Carolina, South Carolina), equivalent to nearly 4% of the company's customers in those states;
  - Georgia Power, which reported more than 170,000 disconnects since July, equivalent to approximately 7.8% of the company's customers;
  - Florida Power & Light, which reported more than 255,000 disconnects since October, equivalent to approximately 5.5% of the company's customers.

These three utilities' disconnects are equivalent to approximately 3.1% of their customers in the four states. If this percentage were applied to the total 120,756,048 households<sup>4</sup> in the United States, that would equal **nearly 3.74 million household disconnects** during the pandemic.

- **The vast majority of states do not require utilities to publicly disclose their household disconnects:**
  - Only 17 state utility commissions provide disconnect data from regulated utilities.
    - ❖ Four of these states only provide partial data. For example, Kansas only provides data through November 2020 in a special report.
  - Another 10 states seemingly require disconnect data but have zero disconnects reported, in large part due to state-level shutoff moratoria (both voluntary and mandatory). Some of these states are expected to see their moratoria expire soon.
  - 23 states do not provide any disconnect data.
- **The utility debt crisis far exceeds disconnects alone.** According to recent research, energy arrears were estimated at \$32 billion nationwide at the end of 2020, and as many as 20% of households were at least 60 days behind on their bills.<sup>6</sup> At the end of March 2021, Florida Power & Light had over 17,000 customers in arrears, owing approximately \$4.3 million, or \$252 per account on average. Georgia Power reported \$69 million in arrears across approximately 402,000 accounts for the same month.

## METHODOLOGY

In early March and then again in May 2021, we searched all 50 state utility commissions' electronic dockets and filings for keywords including "disconnect" and "involuntary termination." In March, we also reached out to all utility commissions via phone calls and/or emails (per website instructions) to ask whether they collect disconnect data and, if so, where it is located. Some utility commissions did not respond to our requests.

<sup>4</sup> The timelines for these disconnect reports vary (e.g., some utilities reported disconnects since July and some reported disconnects since November) but the latest data included is for March (and in some cases April) 2021. For most states, only the major investor-owned utility reports were captured.

<sup>5</sup> See U.S. Census Bureau, QuickFacts: United States, <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/US/HSD410219#HSD410219>.

<sup>6</sup> National Energy Assistance Directors Association, Press Release: Electric and Gas Residential Arrearages are Growing Rapidly, <https://neada.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/covidarrearspr.pdf>.

## DETAILED RESULTS

| State                   | Disconnect Data Findings  | Source  |
|-------------------------|---|---|
| <b>Alabama</b>          | The Alabama Public Service Commission does not collect this data.   | Docket search and phone confirmation.                                       |
| <b>Alaska</b>           | The Regulatory Commission of Alaska does not collect this data.   | Docket search and email confirmation.                                       |
| <b>Arizona</b>          | The Arizona Corporation Commission collects some of this data. Arizona Public Service (APS), as required by Order 77849, reported 10,207 disconnects through March 2021.  | Docket search and phone confirmation.<br><br>See E-00000A-19-0128.          |
| <b>Arkansas</b>         | The Arkansas Public Service Commission does not appear to collect this data.  | Docket search; no confirmation from utility commission.                     |
| <b>California</b>       | The California Public Utilities Commission has multiple dockets related to utility disconnects, including historical data. But the state has had a moratorium in place on shutoffs for regulated utilities since April and reports no disconnects since then. | Docket search and phone confirmation.<br><br>See R1807005.                  |
| <b>Colorado</b>         | The Colorado Public Service Commission collects data on disconnects from regulated utilities. Black Hills Energy and Public Service Company of Colorado, the state's two IOUs, reported a total of 5,601 disconnects through April 2021.                      | Docket search and phone confirmation.<br><br>See Proceeding No. 20M-0267EG. |
| <b>Connecticut</b>      | The Connecticut Public Utilities Regulatory Authority collects this data, but it is difficult to parse through. The total disconnects for Eversource, the state's major IOU, appear to be 83,793 through March 2021.  | Docket search and phone call.<br><br>See Docket No. 18-04-25.               |
| <b>Washington, D.C.</b> | The DC Commission does appear to collect this data, but it has had a moratorium on shutoffs since the beginning of the pandemic.  | Docket search.  |
| <b>Delaware</b>         | The Delaware Public Service Commission does not appear to collect this data.  | Docket search; no confirmation from utility commission.                     |
| <b>Florida</b>          | Regulated utilities have submitted disconnect data at the end of each month since September 2020. Florida Power and Light and Duke Energy Florida report a total of 557,768 disconnects through March 2021.   | Docket search and phone call.<br><br>See Docket No. 20200000.               |
| <b>Georgia</b>          | The Georgia Public Service Commission collects disconnect data for regulated utilities. Georgia Power, the state's largest utility, reports 170,462 disconnects through March 2021.   | Docket search and phone call.<br><br>See Docket No. 42516.                  |

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| <b>Hawaii</b>        | Hawaii's Public Utilities Commission requires reporting on disconnects. Since the state has had a mandatory moratorium in place, utilities are currently reporting zero disconnects for nonpayment.  | Docket search.<br><br>See Docket No. 2020-0209.  |
| <b>Idaho</b>         | Idaho's Public Utilities Commission does not collect this data.  | Docket search and phone confirmation.  |
| <b>Illinois</b>      | The Illinois Commerce Commission collects this data. Utilities reported 17,242 disconnects in April 2021, after the ban was lifted.  | Docket search and email. See 20-NOI-01.  |
| <b>Indiana</b>       | Indiana's Utility Regulatory Commission does collect this data, but it is confidential on its website.   | Phone call and docket search.<br><br>See Cause 45380.  |
| <b>Iowa</b>          | Iowa's Utilities Board collects disconnect data. MidAmerican and Interstate Power and Light, two major utilities, reported 23,570 disconnects through March 2021.  | Phone call and docket search. See "Residential Past Due Accounts & disconnect Data" webpage. |
| <b>Kansas</b>        | The Kansas Corporation Commission collected some of this data through Nov. 2020 for a special report; 31,819 disconnects reported.   | Docket search. See Docket No. 21-ATMG-044-CPL.   |
| <b>Kentucky</b>      | The Kentucky Public Service Commission does not appear to collect this data.   | Docket search; no confirmation.  |
| <b>Louisiana</b>     | The Louisiana Public Service Commission does not appear to collect this data.  | Docket search; no confirmation from utility commission.                                      |
| <b>Maine</b>         | The Maine Public Utilities Commission does not collect this data.  | Docket search and phone confirmation.  |
| <b>Maryland</b>      | The Maryland Public Service Commission collects some monthly disconnect data. Major utilities report 3,909 disconnects through March 2021.   | Docket search.<br><br>See "PC53/COVID-19 Utility Reports" webpage and EO 20-04-29-02.        |
| <b>Massachusetts</b> | The Massachusetts Department of Public Utilities collects this data. National Grid and Eversource, the state's major utilities, are reporting no disconnects due to the back-to-back COVID-related moratorium and cold weather moratorium.   | Docket search; no confirmation from utility commission.<br><br>See Docket No. 20-58.         |
| <b>Michigan</b>      | The Michigan Public Service Commission collects this data; utilities report 30,583 disconnects.  | Docket search and phone confirmation.<br>See Cause U-20757.                                  |
| <b>Minnesota</b>     | The Minnesota Public Utilities Commission requires reporting on disconnects. Since the state has had a mandatory moratorium in place (first for COVID, then per the state's "cold weather rule"), utilities report zero disconnects for nonpayment. Disconnects set to resume August 2021. | Docket search and phone confirmation.<br><br>See Docket No. 20-375.                          |
| <b>Mississippi</b>   | The Mississippi Public Service Commission does not appear to collect this data.  | Docket search; no confirmation from utility commission.                                      |

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| <b>Missouri</b>       | The Missouri Public Service Commission collects monthly disconnect data. The Public Staff created a report compiling all regulated utilities' responses. Utilities report 57,295 disconnects.  | Docket search and email confirmation. See Case No. AW-2020-0356 and Staff Report.                                   |
| <b>Montana</b>        | The Montana Public Service Commission collects this data; at least 1,481 homes have been disconnected since August.  | Email correspondence with PUC.  |
| <b>Nebraska</b>       | The Nebraska Public Services Commission does not collect this data.  | Docket search and phone confirmation.   |
| <b>Nevada</b>         | The Nevada Public Utilities Commission seemingly does collect this data, but requires a FOIA request to access.  | Docket search and phone confirmation.   |
| <b>New Hampshire</b>  | The New Hampshire Public Utilities Commission seemingly does collect this data, but requires a FOIA request to access.   | Docket search and phone confirmation.   |
| <b>New Jersey</b>     | The New Jersey Board of Public Utilities does not appear to collect this data.   | Docket search; no confirmation from utility commission.   |
| <b>New Mexico</b>     | The New Mexico Public Regulation Commission does not appear to collect this data.  | Docket search; no confirmation from utility commission.   |
| <b>New York</b>       | The New York Department of Public Service does collect this information. Since the state has had a mandatory moratorium in place, utilities are currently reporting zero disconnects for nonpayment.   | Docket search and phone confirmation.<br><br>See Case Number 91-M-0744.   |
| <b>North Carolina</b> | Regulated utilities report total number of residential disconnects for nonpayment at the end of each month. Utilities made approximately 66,211* household disconnects October 2020 through March 2021.  | Docket search and phone confirmation.<br><br>See Docket No. M-100, Sub 61A.   |
| <b>North Dakota</b>   | The North Dakota Public Service Commission collects monthly disconnect reports from the three major utilities, but does not provide total counts. Each disconnect is provided as a line item in a table, mixed with gas and commercial disconnects. The total across utilities seems to be 1,622 residential electric customers since September. | Docket search.<br><br>See PU-21-004.  |
| <b>Ohio</b>           | The Public Utilities Commission of Ohio does not appear to have collected this data for 2020. Some data for previous years is available in Case No. 19-974-GE-UNC.   | Docket search; no confirmation from utility commission  |
| <b>Oklahoma</b>       | The Oklahoma Corporation Commission does not appear to collect this data.  | Docket search; utility commission staff did not know if information was available but suggested to look on website. |
| <b>Oregon</b>         | The Oregon Public Utilities Commission does collect this data but utilities have agreed to a voluntary moratorium and are reporting no disconnects.  | Docket search.<br><br>See OAR 860-021-0408.   |

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| <b>Pennsylvania</b>   | The Pennsylvania Public Utilities Commission collects monthly disconnect reports from the major regulated utilities. Although some utilities continue to refrain from disconnecting customers, others are reporting at least 4,135 disconnects. | Docket search and phone confirmation.<br><br>See Docket No. M-2020-3019244. |
| <b>Rhode Island</b>   | The Rhode Island Division of Public Utilities and Carriers does collect this data, but its sole IOU is reporting no disconnects due to the back-to-back COVID-related moratorium and cold weather moratorium.                                   | Docket search and email confirmation.<br><br>See Docket 1725.               |
| <b>South Carolina</b> | Regulated utilities submit quarterly reports to the Commission. Utilities are reporting at least 60,357 disconnects through March 2021.   | Docket search and phone call.<br><br>See Docket No. 2006-193-EG.            |
| <b>South Dakota</b>   | The South Dakota Public Utilities Commission does not appear to collect this data.  | Docket search and phone confirmation.                                       |
| <b>Tennessee</b>      | The Tennessee Public Utility Commission does not appear to collect this data.   | Docket search and phone confirmation.                                       |
| <b>Texas</b>          | The Public Utility Commission of Texas does not appear to collect this data.  | Docket search; no confirmation from utility commission.                     |
| <b>Utah</b>           | The Utah Public Service Commission collects some of this data. Rocky Mountain Power reports at least 927 disconnects.   | Docket search.<br>See Docket No. 20-035-20.                                 |
| <b>Vermont</b>        | The Vermont Public Utility Commission does collect this data, but its sole IOU reports zero disconnects due to the back-to-back COVID-related moratorium and cold weather moratorium.   | Docket search and phone confirmation.<br>See 20-0703-PET.                   |
| <b>Virginia</b>       | The Virginia State Corporation Commission does not appear to collect this data.   | Docket search; no confirmation from utility commission.                     |
| <b>Washington</b>     | The Washington Utilities and Transportation Commission does collect this data, but utilities are not reporting disconnects because the state has been under a moratorium.   | Docket search and phone confirmation.                                       |
| <b>West Virginia</b>  | The Public Service Commission of West Virginia seemingly does collect this data, but it is extremely difficult to parse through.  | Docket search and phone confirmation.<br><br>See Order EGCT.                |
| <b>Wisconsin</b>      | The Wisconsin Public Service Commission does not appear to provide this data publicly.  | Docket search and phone confirmation.                                       |
| <b>Wyoming</b>        | The Wyoming Public Service Commission does not collect this data.   | Docket search and email confirmation.                                       |

*\*Correction: this number includes Dominion's gas customers. Without gas customers, the total electric disconnects for North Carolina is 60,474 for that time period. Including March 2020 electric disconnects, the total is 70,730.*

*If you have updates for us, please email [gryan@biologicaldiversity.org](mailto:gryan@biologicaldiversity.org).*

## CONCLUSION: BOTH IMMEDIATE AND LONG-TERM FEDERAL ACTION NEEDED

The ongoing crisis of utility shutoffs highlights the urgent need for both short-term relief and long-term energy equity solutions.

The #NoShutOffs Coalition, a national coalition of more than 1,200 organizations, has pushed for the moratorium through legislative action<sup>8</sup> or executive order<sup>9</sup> as immediate COVID relief. Though the House of Representatives passed a nationwide moratorium on shutoffs in the HEROES Act in 2020, Congress has failed to enact the moratorium to date. The most recent America Rescue Plan Act of 2021<sup>10</sup> only dedicated \$4.5 billion dedicated to low-income home energy assistance, a miniscule fraction of the estimated \$25 billion in outstanding electricity customer debt.

The #NoShutOffs Coalition, a national coalition of more than 1,200 organizations, has pushed for the moratorium through legislative action<sup>9</sup> or executive order<sup>10</sup> as immediate COVID relief. Long-term solutions require wholesale energy system reform — including rapid deployment of rooftop and community solar and storage to lower energy burdens and increase climate resilience, as well as transparency in shutoff data to track the chronic problem.

The fight for shutoffs relief is ongoing; Senator Merkley (D-OR) recently introduced the Maintaining Access to Essential Services Act,<sup>11</sup> which would provide low-interest loans to electric, water and broadband utilities to cover the cost of uncollected household payments during the pandemic in exchange for a moratorium on shutoffs. And Cori Bush and Jamaal Bowman recently introduced a public power resolution<sup>12</sup> that expresses, among other things, growing support for universal energy access and the notion that long-term solutions require wholesale energy system reform — including rapid deployment of community-controlled solar and storage to lower energy burdens and increase climate resilience.

At a minimum, to sufficiently address the chronic injustices of power shutoffs and inequitable energy burdens, we need transparency from regulators and utilities to understand the scope of the problem. The fact that nearly half of states do not require disconnections disclosures means that regulators and lawmakers do not have a comprehensive understanding of the scale of power disconnections occurring across the country. This is a gaping hole of information that needs to be addressed in order for utility regulators and lawmakers to serve the public interest. In February 2021, Senator Ed Markey helped compel the U.S. Census Bureau to collect data regarding American households' experiences with paying utility bills during the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>13</sup> While a solid step, comprehensive data about utility shutoffs requires regular reporting from utilities themselves either to state utility commissions or state and federal governments.

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<sup>8</sup> In Next Coronavirus Rescue Bill, 830 Groups Urge Congress to Halt Electricity, Water, Broadband Shutoffs (April 13, 2020), <https://biologicaldiversity.org/w/news/press-releases/next-coronavirus-rescue-bill-830-groups-urge-congress-halt-electricity-water-broadband-shutoffs-2020-04-13/>.

<sup>9</sup> 600+ Groups Urge Biden to Halt Water, Electricity, and Broadband Shutoffs through Emergency Executive Order on Day 1 (January 13, 2021), <https://foodandwaterwatch.org/news/600-groups-urge-biden-halt-water-electricity-and-broadband-shutoffs-through-emergency-executive>.

<sup>10</sup> H.R. 1319, 117th Cong. (2021), <https://www.budget.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/American%20Rescue%20Plan%20Act%20SEN-ATE.pdf>.

<sup>11</sup> S. 1783, 117th Cong. (2021), <https://www.merkley.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/21.05.18%20Maintaining%20Access%20to%20Essential%20Services%20Act%20of%202021.pdf>.

<sup>12</sup> H.Res.457, 117th Cong. (2021), <https://www.congress.gov/bill/117th-congress/house-resolution/457?q=%7B%22search%22%3A%5B%22environmental+protection%22%5D%7D&s=1&r=43>.

<sup>13</sup> Letter from U.S. Census Bureau to Senator Markey (March 22, 2021), [https://www.markey.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/\(3.29.2021\)%20CQAS-10951signed.pdf](https://www.markey.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/(3.29.2021)%20CQAS-10951signed.pdf).